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# THE PLEA OF THE CHILD LABORER.

BY AARON HARDY ULM.

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THE person or persons who look for child-labor material in the South are pretty apt to find the kind they want. Conditions there present so many apparent contradictions that the outside investigator finds it practically impossible to obtain an impartial perspective. Such can only be secured at the best by long and patient toil, with a residence among these people in different sections and under varied influences. Even by this method, the investigators who begin with a purpose or anything bordering on preconceived opinions will find themselves handicapped; for there exists evidence which, if presented alone, will justify any view taken.

Much discussion of the subject leads me, in general, to endeavor to give a new point of view. The mistake made by all writers whose outpourings I have read is that they confine their investigations to the child alone, forgetting to study the kind of men and women turned out by an economic condition in which the employment of children of tender age is only the worst part and the basic principle.

In stating my premises, I must beg leave to make some personal explanations. In my fourteenth year, circumstances placed me in a cotton-mill as a fifty-cents-a-day laborer. I was taken from the country, where my home had been humble but comfortable, and my general environment of the average kind then to be found in the rural districts of the South. During the greater part of three years, I was a regular operative, working in different departments, and mostly in those where children are mainly employed. After that time, I was fortunate in obtaining employment on the outside, but for nearly ten years my life was cast among these people almost as closely as if I had been working

side by side with them. I was far from the land of cotton for two years; but, returning, I was a newspaper reporter for three years in the town where I had worked as a mill-hand. In that capacity the tragic and pathetic sides of the lives of mill-hands were presented to me more forcibly than they ever had been before, as my work took me to the courts regularly and kept me familiar with police happenings and the working of philanthropic and charitable institutions.

If I may be indulged a little further, I will state that I have made no special study of sociology, nor any study of social conditions excepting as I have thought and observed on all problems of life with which I have come into contact. I have been identified with no crusade against the evils I will hereinafter attempt to depict, and I have before written nothing on the subject except one or two newspaper "feature" stories.

I say unequivocally that it would have been better if the South had never come into possession of a single cotton-factory than to have founded a prosperous industry on the labor of children. This statement is radical, but true. It was the child that first attracted Northern investors there—in other words, cheap labor unencumbered by legal restrictions. Had the same regulations over the employment of children prevailed there as have obtained in Massachusetts for many years, this industry would not have grown so rapidly and would not now be of such great proportions. The average cotton-mill worker of the North is a product of generations, bred and born to the loom, or, at least, not new to industrial confinement. He is much better adapted to the service of a machine and to imprisonment within the four walls between which he must work than the Southerner of thirty years ago, who knew only the open, having come down from centuries of agricultural forebears ignorant of industrial restraint. The Northern operative is more profitable to-day, as is shown by the greater prosperity of the mills far from the cotton-fields.

This is one of the reasons why there has been no lack of children upon whom to nourish this industry. In the mad desire for that which furnished much of the cause for the Civil War, and which they risked their lives to resist—industrialism—the Southerners forgot the duty of race protection. Capitalists were invited to build mills and allowed to draw discontented thousands from impoverished farms, to clutch them with the

tenacity of a vise and practically to own them. Comparatively few who are once drawn into the attractive web of cotton-mill work have been able to escape this doom. Once habituated to it, the workers find a fascination in it that is hard to resist. In the old mill towns, and there are a few that have existed for a century or more, may be seen families that have little or no record or memory of any other life. So far as they know, all their ancestors were mill-workers, and they take it as an indisputable edict of fate that they must ever be mill-workers also. Accustomed to the military-like routine, to the easy care-free existence possible in the half-feudal communities, few ever desire to better their condition. This is particularly true of those who begin the work in childhood. To-day thousands of white people are bound to a single calling, living a life that knows not ambition and encourages no initiative. There can be only one result. Apart from the tendency of the work to cause physical deterioration, the system, if not checked, will produce a race of irresponsible dependents,—a class bound by the iron hand of caste and industrial necessity to a lowly place in life.

This state of affairs is largely due to child labor. I have seen children seven years of age working in the mills. I have known them to be compelled to spend twelve hours therein for the munificent sum of twelve and a half cents. I have known others to grow up from infancy therein; first accompanying their mothers to their work, and then becoming sweepers, few of them receiving more than twenty-five cents a day, at the first show of sufficient strength.

The statement recently made that the "lowest class of whites" go to the mills and place their children therein, therefore in reality bettering the condition of the little ones, is, unless modified, untrue. It is a fact that many workers are drawn from the lowest class, but this class is not composed of the "poor whites"; it is lower, being more commonly known as "white trash" or "tacky people." They do not make successful mill-hands. They seldom remain there very long, but return to the hand-to-mouth, work-free existence of rural life. The exceptions are in cases where there are a sufficient number of children in the family to provide a livelihood for all. Then the little tots are forced by idle fathers and indolent mothers into the factories and compelled to stay there. Follow these children, and you will

find that, as soon as they reach the years of self-will, heredity asserts itself; the boys become tramps or cotton-mill hoboës, travelling from place to place and working only when it is necessary to keep body and soul together. This product of the system often marries a weak woman, and then compels her to work while he loafes with others of his kind and spends the money she earns. So numerous is this specimen of so-called "man" that he has given rise to a brand-new term—"dinner-toter"—which denotes the only useful thing he ever does, that is to carry the midday meal to his servile companion. The girls often become prostitutes—I refer only to the "lowest class of whites," for in the cardinal principles of chastity no girls are purer than those of the average "poor whites," either in mill or country.

The greater proportion of the mill-help comes from the one-horse farmer class, the people who have risen above the "white trash" element or fallen from the home-owning one. It is the class of people who have to rent land and lack the perseverance or good fortune to establish permanent homes, but who live in a fair degree of comfort and give their children the nucleus of an education—that is, as long as they remain on the farm. Often the children are allowed to chose between mill and field, and few white girls of self-respect fail to choose the former. The boy casts his vote for the factory, in order that he may have opportunity to realize romantic dreams of town or city life; the element of pride does not enter into his calculation, for in no part of that section with which I am familiar is it considered anything but honorable and commendable for boys or young men to wield the hoe or follow the plough.

During the hard times after the Civil War, thousands of these people flocked to the mill centres, then in the first stage of development. Later, during the depression of the early nineties, they went in such numbers that there was a congestion of labor in the cotton-mills and a labor famine on the farms.

In the mills are representatives of the best families, but these are rare. To do such work places a social blot upon one which few well-connected people will bear; I have known them to suffer the lack of food rather than sacrifice their pride in such endeavor.

It is true that many go to the mills from the mountains. One who investigates with the eye and ear alone will think, and reasonably so, that the change betters the state of the children.

Their homes in the hills are squalid; the mill homes are plain, but secure from rain and cold, and fairly sanitary. In their native region, schools are often unknown, culture a stranger and religion a weird superstition. In towns they have at least the semblance of schools, and churches that are looked after by young and unpractical "charity" preachers; and on Sundays they occasionally observe a well-dressed sightseer and hear respectable English spoken. In the mountains, they have hills and open fields, the fresh air and the uplift of all nature. Their social life there is governed by a crude code of ethics and morals; a standard of personal honor prevails that might well be copied in more "civilized" communities; they retain their physical and mental virility, and occasionally send forth a boy who becomes famous. This cannot be said of the mills to which, in some sections, they flock. The children are kept in the mills to support fathers who idle their time in saloons or with worthless companions. That which happens when any crude people—and that is what these mountaineers are—are thrown together in large bodies occurs here. They lose the good qualities of their former state, while all the bad qualities crop out with renewed force. However, outside the Piedmont region the mountaineer is barely known as mill operative.

Despite so-called "child-labor legislation," any girl or boy, ten or eleven years old, and of average physical development, can obtain employment in the majority of the mills of the South. In nearly every State, if not in all of them, the laws are nullified by the absence of practical methods of enforcement and by the many subterfuges and evasions possible. At least fifty per cent. of the work can be—I do not say is—done by children under fifteen years of age. The reason they do not do more is that the supply of children is less than the demand. In my experience, some of which occurred during a congestion of the labor-market, I never saw the time when a child could not obtain employment.

An artist is ridiculed for drawing the form of a little girl beside a loom. Any one fourteen years old and of average intelligence can operate four looms; in cases of special proficiency and industry I have known one of such age to operate six. Child weavers are not common, because, the work being paid for by the piece, there is no opportunity for discrimination against children. It is natural that an adult should take better care of the ma-

chinery and make it more productive. The spinning-room forces are almost entirely made up of children. The idea of an adjustable spinning-frame is laughed at by one who knows, for such a thing is not needed so long as boxes or stools will supply deficiency in height—which is a handicap even to the smallest of them only when reaching for and placing in position the spools of twisted cotton.

In midwinter, these little workers see the break of day as they trudge along the route to the mill or look from the windows of the room in which they work. During that season they work an hour morning and evening, on an average, by electric light. They hobble to their homes, often along badly kept streets, through almost total darkness. Considering the time they spend in dressing and breakfasting, the time spent going to and from work and at supper, these children have little more than ten hours of each twenty-four to themselves for unrestrained rest or study. And many young men of my acquaintance attended schools at night, and acquired, while boys, good common-school education under these severe restrictions. This proves the hardihood of the race, a large part of which the mill system is devouring.

In the mills the workers are thrown together promiscuously. All classes, characters and ages must work side by side. Little girls, who should not know the meaning of sin, must often toil in close companionship with brawny, rough men, whose language is not always clear of profanity or even indecency. These innocent little ones have before them daily the example of those of their older co-workers whose self-respect has broken down beneath the strain. Those angelic few—for whom monuments should be erected—who withstand it all and grow up amidst temptation undefiled, retaining pride and self-respect and refinement, are placed in the position of an unassertive minority, which is little attractive to an inexperienced child. Tiny boys go there from the innocence and the native culture to be found on even the poorest farm, to be thrown among a hardened class of youths whose ambition is solely to pattern themselves after the bad habits of their elders. To chew the most tobacco, to smoke the greatest number of cigarettes, to use most deftly the unprintable words of blasphemy and obscenity, are soon bound to be considered marks of superiority. Where is even the man who does not like to stand well before his fellows, and to be looked up to by his intimate companions?

The work, of necessity, affects physical and mental growth. The absence of sunshine and fresh air, the dust-charged and lint-laden atmosphere which they have to breathe, the humid climatic conditions, the long hours upon their feet and the stooped position they have to assume while performing their duties, particularly in the case of "doffer boys," can have no other effect than to prevent the normal development of the physical functions. Search the records of the War Department. Seldom is a young man who spent his life in a cotton-mill accepted for enlistment. Even during the Spanish-American War, when the usual restrictions were slackened, only a small percentage of such applicants were accepted. So hopeless have they become as prospective soldiers that the recruiting service now makes but little effort to secure them; such work is looked upon as futile, though applications are always plentiful. Physical examinations show them to be lacking in height, or too tall for their weight. Arms and legs are often abnormally long, and in a large majority of cases the chest measurement is alarmingly inadequate.

The ceaseless hum of machinery to which they are subjected gives a warped direction to their brain, and the starved physique appropriates practically all the natural nourishment, at the cost of the brain, that comes in their path. The absence of any educative element in their work, excepting that they use their hands, tends to destroy all inherent ambition and to smother energy. The long hours and small pay stifle perseverance.

I am speaking of the mill-workers who begin as children undeveloped, mentally and physically. Talk to one of this class of operatives who has reached maturity. His hopes will be found to centre around the next pay-day. For him two weeks is the future. Speak to him of obligations to his wife and children, and learn that he regards them—with crude affection, it is true—as representing a certain present or prospective income, much as you would regard a good horse you raised from a colt with mixed feelings of love and interest. Go into the mills and see them work in bare feet with their bodies half-clad, in order that they may wear badly fitting, but creased and starched, store clothes on Sunday. Note the lack of modesty among the young women of this class—their makeshift working costumes, their snuff-rubbing and expectorating habits, and their childish love of gaudy apparel for use on holidays.



In the mills, or most of them, the girls and women are provided with dressing-rooms that are neither sanitary nor comfortable. Often these are not more than partially private. A hundred or more have to use a small enclosure of less capacity than the average sleeping-apartment. They must provide their own soap and towels, and use for a basin a common iron sink, unless they keep one of their own. Little provision is made for sitting down during leisure moments.

Little girls are frequently subjected to and must hear the vulgar taunts of coarse overseers and foremen, and the older and more comely ones must often repel at the cost of fair treatment, or accept at the cost of their honor, the privileged advances of the "boss." Women who are shamelessly base are in some instances allowed to flaunt their immorality before the eyes of budding childhood, paying a little of the tribute of hypocrisy to virtue, and in such cases the young ones have every opportunity of observing how the roadway is smoothed for the woman who enjoys the special friendship of the superintendent or overseer.

What is the result? Few children who enter the mills below the age of fourteen ever do anything else or better. The boys of this class seldom rise above the ordinary operative. They marry early and unprepared, and the girls, nearly always too young to bear the burden of motherhood under the most favorable conditions, must assume that sacred trust, work in the factory and care for her home all at the same time. What kind of progeny can be expected from them? Separations or desertions often begin before they are together more than a few months, and life becomes a series of domestic squabbles. In other cases, children come rapidly, and are reared in the most squalid fashion, and are put on an earning basis as early as possible. These children are necessarily weaklings from infancy; they live a life of misery; and, as a rule, they die early, but not until they continue the chain of burden-bearing through reproduction.

This is the appeal of the child, and through it of the race.

It is no problem for the impracticable philanthropist, or the maudlin sentimentalist. As a recent writer well observed, it needs the application of common sense. Those who study it must explore the hearts of the poor folk and sound the depths of their melancholy souls before progress will be made. I have refrained from giving examples, as none, not even a collection, would

fairly represent the situation. Each could probably be duplicated in other fields. I could have cited—of the tragedies that have crossed my own life—happy homes that have been shattered and its members sent like chaff to the four corners of the earth. I might mention cases of imbecility and physical deformity that, of my own knowledge, have resulted from this system. Individual cases might be given of girls whose pride and self-respect have been blasted, and of boys whose prospects and hopes have been wrecked on the breakers of cotton-mill circumstances. Such illustrations would only represent extremes.

There are numerous companies, presidents and superintendents, whose humanity in dealing with these conditions is unsurpassed. Many have enforced age limits outside and above the law, and I know of my own personal knowledge that several companies endeavor in every way that is compatible with the demands of competition to make their operatives better men and women and to keep them so. Some of these companies sacrifice dividends in the interest of their help. There have been times when operatives of an entire community would have suffered severe distress had not their employer, the company, at great expense stood between them and misfortune. In most of the small mill towns, the companies exercise a paternalism that is benevolent indeed. The mill operative and owner are inherently as good people as the world produces. It is not the men, but the conditions, that must be decried.

There are boys of my acquaintance, whom I number among my best personal friends, who have risen above these conditions, to make their places in business and the professions, and girls who have become the best of wives and mothers. These instances argue nothing in defence of the system, but they speak volumes for the indomitable courage of the Anglo-Saxon.

To correct these evils, there must be some sort of harmonious action on the part of all the Cotton States. It is not fair for one to deprive its investors of privileges enjoyed by those of another. For general adoption, I recommend the following, and I take occasion to predict that these regulations, or some of similar character, will some day be enforced throughout the Southern mill section:

Forbid the employment of children under fourteen years of age, without exception; forbid the employment of children un-

der fifteen years, except during the vacation period; forbid the permanent employment of children under sixteen who cannot show a certificate of completion from a standard grammar-school.

As for exceptions to most of such statutes in favor of "widowed mothers and invalid fathers," by which, it may be said, the laws can be forever evaded, I beg to say that they are not needed. There is no such mother or father who cannot get along just as well with his or her children outside as within the mills.

In addition to the child regulations, I suggest the following:

Separate the sexes as far as practicable. (This can be almost completely done.)

Require the employment of women foremen or "second hands" for their own sex.

Make it a crime to employ a married woman who is a prospective or young mother.

Forbid the employment of women or children for night-work.

Compel the companies to furnish comfortable chairs or stools for the use of the girls and women during leisure moments, and adequate, private and comfortably equipped dressing-rooms.

Provide Factory Inspectors, some of whom shall be women, to devote their entire time to seeing that the laws governing child and female labor are enforced.

Provide severe fines or confinement in prison for presidents or superintendents who permit violations of the law.

It might be said that these regulations are practically in operation over the big department stores of the large cities, where the hours are shorter, the work lighter and lurking danger less imminent—also over factories in many States.

I will state in conclusion that close intimacy with mill conditions ceased with me six years ago. Since that time I have made some investigations, and, while there is much to be corrected, I must state that there has been considerable improvement. The trend of legislation in all the Southern States is favorable, and I have no doubt that in a few years all that laws can accomplish towards removing the evils of the system will have been done. But the greatest good will come through the awakening of the bulk of noble Southern people to the needs of, and conditions surrounding, their unfortunate brothers and sisters of the mills.

AARON HARDY ULM.